

Stress and Your Health

Feeling stressed out? It's hard to stay calm and relaxed in our hectic lives. Not only do our day-to-day tasks stress us out, but many of us are coping with serious illnesses in our families and dealing with other problems. As women, we have many roles: spouse, mother, caregiver, friend, and/or worker. With all we have going on in our lives, it seems almost impossible to find ways to de-stress. But it's important to find those ways. Your health depends on it.

How Women React to Stress

We all deal with stressful things like traffic, arguments with spouses, and job problems. Some researchers think that women handle stress in a unique way: we tend and befriend.

- **Tend:** women protect and care for their children
- **Befriend:** women seek out and receive social support

Women's bodies make chemicals that are believed to promote these responses. One of these chemicals is oxytocin (ahk-see-toe-sin), which has a calming effect during stress. This is the same chemical released during childbirth and found at higher levels in breastfeeding mothers, who are believed to be calmer than women who don't breastfeed. Women also have the



hormone estrogen, which boosts the effects of oxytocin. Men, however, have high levels of testosterone during stress, which blocks the calming effects of oxytocin and causes hostility, withdrawal, and anger.

Stress Affects Your Entire Body

Everyone has stress at times. We have short-term stress, like getting lost while driving or missing the bus. Even everyday events, such as planning a meal or making time for errands, can be stressful. This kind of stress can make us feel worried or anxious.

Other times, we face long-term stress, such as a life-threatening illness, chronic disease, disability, or divorce. These stressful events also affect your health on many levels. Long-term stress is real and can increase your risk for some health problems, like depression.

Both short and long-term stress can have effects on your body. Research is starting to identify the serious effects of stress on our bodies. Stress triggers changes in our bodies and makes us more likely to get sick. It can also make problems we already have worse.

<p>Stress can play a part in these problems:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • trouble sleeping • headaches • constipation • diarrhea • irritability • lack of energy • lack of concentration 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • eating too much or not at all • anger • sadness • higher risk of asthma and arthritis flare-ups • tension • stomach cramping • stomach bloating • skin problems, like hives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • depression • anxiety • weight gain or loss • heart problems • high blood pressure • irritable bowel syndrome • diabetes • neck and/or back pain • less sexual desire • harder to get pregnant
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Don't Let Stress Make You Sick

As women, we tend to carry a higher burden of stress than we should. Often we aren't even aware of our stress levels. Listen to your body, so that you know when stress is affecting your health. Here are ways to help you handle your stress.

- **Relax.** It's important to unwind. Each person has her own way to relax. Some ways include deep breathing, yoga, meditation, and massage therapy. You can also take a few minutes to sit, listen to soothing music, or read a book.

- **Make time for yourself.** It's important to care for yourself. Think of this as an order from your doctor, so you don't feel guilty! No matter how busy you are, you can try to set aside at least 15 minutes each day in your schedule to do something for yourself, like taking a bubble bath, going for a walk, or calling a friend.
- **Sleep.** Sleeping is a great way to help both your body and mind. Your stress could get worse if you don't get enough sleep. You also can't fight off sickness as well when you sleep poorly. With

enough sleep, you can tackle your problems better and lower your risk for illness. Try to get seven to nine hours of sleep every night.

- **Eat healthy.** Try to fuel up with fruits, vegetables, and whole-grain foods, such as whole-grain crackers and breads. Don't be fooled by the jolt you get from caffeine or sugar. Your energy will wear off.
- **Get moving.** Believe it or not, getting physical activity not only helps relieve your tense muscles, but helps your mood too! Your body makes certain chemicals, called endorphins, after you work out. They relieve stress and improve your mood. *See page 70-71 for ways to be active.*
- **Talk to friends.** Talk to your friends to help you work through your stress.



Most Stressful Life Events

Any change in our lives can be stressful, even some of the happiest ones like having a baby or taking a new job. Here are some of life's most stressful events.

- death of a spouse
- divorce
- marital separation
- spending time in jail
- death of a close family member
- personal illness or injury
- marriage
- pregnancy
- retirement

From the Holmes and Rahe Scale of Life Events (1967)

Friends are good listeners. Finding someone who will let you talk freely about your problems and feelings without judging you does a world of good. It also helps to hear a different point of view. Friends will remind you that you're not alone.

- **Get help from a professional if you need it.** Talk to a therapist. A therapist can help you work through stress and find better ways to deal with problems.
- **Compromise.** Sometimes, it's not always worth the stress to argue. Give in once in awhile.
- **Write down your thoughts.** Have you ever typed an email to a friend about

Deep Breathing: A Guide

Deep breathing is a good way to relax. Try it a couple of times every day. Here's how to do it.

1. Lie down or sit in a chair.
2. Rest your hands on your abdomen.
3. Slowly count to four and inhale through your nose. Feel your abdomen rise. Hold it for a second.
4. Slowly count to four while you exhale through your mouth. To control how fast you exhale, purse your lips like you're going to whistle. Your abdomen will slowly fall.
5. Repeat 5 to 10 times.

your lousy day and felt better afterward? Why not grab a pen and paper and write down what's going on in your life! Keeping a journal can be a great way to get things off your chest and work through issues. Later, you can go back and read through your journal and see how you've made progress!

- **Help others.** Helping someone else can help you. Help your neighbor, or volunteer in your community.
- **Get a hobby.** Find something you enjoy. Be sure to give yourself time to explore your interests.
- **Set limits.** When it comes to things like work and family, figure out what you can really do. There are only so many

hours in the day. Set limits with yourself and others. Don't be afraid to say NO to requests for your time and energy.

- **Plan your time.** Think ahead about how you're going to spend your time. Write a to-do list. Figure out what's most important to do.
- **Don't deal with stress in unhealthy ways.** This includes drinking too much alcohol, using drugs, smoking, or overeating.

Then and Now

Guess who is most likely to get an ulcer?

- a. High school teacher
- b. Police officer
- c. Medical resident
- d. Stockbroker
- e. Reporter
- f. Waiter
- g. Mother

They all have the same chance of getting an ulcer! Doctors used to think that ulcers were caused by stress and spicy foods. Now, we know that stress doesn't cause ulcers—it just irritates them. Ulcers are actually caused by a germ called *H. pylori*. Researchers don't yet know for sure how people get it. They think people might get it through food or water. It's treated with a combination of antibiotics and other drugs.